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PLAN COLOMBIA - A STRATEGY FOR CONTINUED FAILURE IN AMERICA'S FIGHT
AGAINST DRUGS

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PLAN COLOMBIA - A STRATEGY FOR CONTINUED FAILURE IN AMERICA'S FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS

INTRODUCTION

“Plan Colombia,” the \$1.3 billion centerpiece of the United States’ strategy for reducing America’s illegal drug habits through source country supply reduction, is fundamentally flawed. It will not only fail to meet its primary objective of reducing drug abuse in the United States, but it will also have the undesirable effect of causing additional bloodshed abroad, by providing more fuel for a 37-year old civil war. The United States needs to look at alternative strategies focused on demand-side reduction through user accountability and education, if it is ever to minimize the negative effects of drug abuse at home.

This essay will introduce the reader to Plan Colombia; discuss the U.S. national interests and the threats and opportunities that have led to U.S. involvement in Colombia; examine the basic concepts of the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy; and explore the history of the Colombian civil war. It will then discuss strengths and weaknesses of continued U.S. support of Plan Colombia, and present recommendations for alternative strategies.

PLAN COLOMBIA

In 1999, at the urging of the United States, Colombian President Andres Pastrana, developed a three-year, \$7.5 billion strategy known as “Plan Colombia” to reduce the levels of drug trafficking and violence in Colombia. The plan included drug interdiction, drug eradication through spraying, alternative crop development, and peace initiatives. Colombia pledged to contribute \$4 billion and asked the United States to contribute \$2 billion more. The remainder

was to come from institutions such as the World Bank and the European Union.¹ In fiscal year 2001, the United States contributed \$1.3 billion toward Plan Colombia. The majority (\$900 million) of the U.S. contribution funded purchase of 69 Blackhawk and Huey II helicopters, and training for a 3,000 member special anti-narcotics brigade in the Colombian Army.² President Bush's fiscal year 2002 budget proposal includes an additional \$400 million for Plan Colombia.³

NATIONAL INTERESTS, THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In his December 2000, A National Security Strategy For a Global Age, President Clinton identified fighting drug trafficking as a national interest. "We aim to cut illegal drug use and availability in the United States by 50% by 2007, and reduce the health and social consequences of drug use and trafficking by 25% over the same period."⁴

In the same policy document, but in the lower category of "Humanitarian and Other Longer-Term Interests" he lists, "...acting to halt gross violations of human rights; and encouraging adherence to the rule of law and civilian control of the military."⁵

The "Integrated Regional Approach" specifically addresses Colombia:

Colombia is of special importance because drug trafficking is fueling the longest running internal conflict in the region. The combination of armed insurgents, growing paramilitary movement, corruption, and economic malaise extends beyond its borders and has implications for regional peace and security. To turn the tide, the United States is providing the Colombian Government assistance to wage a comprehensive effort to

¹ Carol Clark, "Plan Colombia: Is the U.S. Addicted to Military Fixes?" *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/colombia.noframes/story/essays/clark>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

² Juan Foreno, "Colombia's Army Steps Up Its Challenge to Rebels," *New York Times*, 2 September 2001.

³ Scott Wilson, "Colombia's Peace Bid at Risk," *Washington Post*, 25 August 2001, p. A13.

⁴ The White House, A National Security Strategy for a Global Age (December 2000), 25-26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

promote the mutually reinforcing goals of peace, illicit drug control, economic development, and respect for human rights.⁶

THREATS

Illegal drugs cost our society 52,000 lives and \$110 billion a year. Colombia is the world's leading coca producer and cocaine exporter and a rapidly emerging source of heroin. Ninety percent of the cocaine and most of the heroin in the U.S. market now comes from Colombia.⁷

Drug traffickers are destroying the free market democratic institutions of Colombia. Colombia is an important trading partner with the United States. They are its eighth largest oil supplier, and two-way trade reached nearly \$11 billion in 1998.⁸

OPPORTUNITIES

By stopping drugs at the source, the United States can reduce the supply. Then following the basic economic theory of supply and demand, the price will rise, thus reducing consumption.

Plan Colombia offers two additional opportunities that would never be publicly stated, but cut to the heart of the axiom that all politics are local. First, it would minimize American casualties in a violent business by funding the Colombian Army to fight a proxy war for the United States. Second, by focusing American counter-drug efforts on source country supply reduction, only foreigners can be punished. Politicians can still claim to be tough on drugs without putting their constituents and their families at risk of being punished.

⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁷ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Why Americans Should Care About Plan Colombia," U.S. Department of State (Washington, DC, 21 February 2001).

⁸ Ibid.

U.S. COUNTER-DRUG EFFORTS

There are three legs to the United States' drug control strategy. The first leg is supply reduction. This is accomplished by federal law enforcement agencies through interdiction while the drugs are in transit or crossing the borders by sea, air, or land; while domestic law enforcement agencies focus their efforts on local suppliers or dealers. In recent years, the United States has added crop eradication in the source countries to the supply reduction tactics. The second leg of the approach is demand reduction. This has been attempted in several ways, including education, using punishment as a disincentive, and by forcing up the price of drugs through a successful supply reduction program. The third leg is treatment to help drug abusers recover from addiction.

COLOMBIAN CIVIL WAR

A civil war has raged in Colombia for 37 years. It is a war of murders, kidnappings, bombings, destroyed villages, and displaced peoples. Former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo wrote in the July/August 2000 issue of *Foreign Affairs Magazine* that in the past 15 years, "...four presidential candidates, 200 judges and investigators, 1,200 police officers, 151 journalists and more than 300,000 ordinary Colombians were murdered."⁹ Every three hours, someone in Colombia is kidnapped. More than half of the world's kidnappings occur in Colombia, nearly 3,000 last year.¹⁰

It is a multi-polar conflict, with the different sides being very fluid. New movements crop up, achieve power, lose power, ally with others, fraction into splinter groups, declare cease fires,

⁹ "Crime," *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/specials/0008/colombia.issues/crime.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

and resume hostilities constantly. Today, there are four major powers in the conflict: the Colombian Army, the leftist guerilla groups FARC and ELN, and the right-winged paramilitary AUC.

The Colombia Army with over 100,000 men outnumbered all of the Colombian rebel forces by 5 to 1, but because of serious deficiencies in training and morale they are often no match for the leftist guerrillas. A flawed system perpetuates the problem. Colombian law excludes high school graduates from the draft. Thus few men from the wealthy and middle classes are forced to serve.

“Those soldiers on the front lines against the guerrillas are typically undereducated conscripts from the nation’s poorest sectors, poorly trained and poorly paid. So army soldiers often find themselves fighting guerrillas and paramilitaries from the same economic class they come from – except the latter groups pay better.”¹¹

The next largest group is the FARC - Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia). The FARC, estimated to have 17,000 soldiers, was formed during the mid 1960s as a Cuban-supported Marxist movement. They advocated widespread reforms and redistribution of wealth. In the mid-1980s they declared a truce and attempted to peacefully enter the political arena, forming a party called the Union Patriótica. An estimated 3,500 party members “disappeared” and by 1987 the truce with the government had ended. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of the cocaine trade, the basis of their

¹⁰ Steve Nettleton, “Kidnapped: Pinned by the Sword and the Wall,” *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/colombia.noframes/story/reports/kidnapped/index.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

¹¹ “The Colombian Army,” *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/specials/0008/organization.profiles/army.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

support shifted to collecting protection money and taxes from the drug traffickers. Estimates of their drug related earnings range from \$30 to \$700 million per year.¹²

A second Marxist-oriented rebel army, the ELN – Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (National Liberation Army), numbers around 5,000. FARC and ELN have occasionally formed military alliances when needed to confront the army and paramilitary forces.¹³

Opposing FARC and ELN are the “paramilitaries.” The largest of these is the right-winged AUC – Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia).

Numerous paramilitary groups formed in the 1980s to protect villages and drug traffickers from the leftist guerrillas. Many of these combined in 1997 to form the AUC. Estimates of their numbers range from 5,000 to 7,000 fighters. The Center for International Policy in Washington, DC reports, “The paramilitaries are responsible for about 75 percent of all politically motivated killings and the vast majority of forced displacements in Colombia.”¹⁴ The Colombian Army has been closely linked to the AUC. A February 2000 report from the Human Rights Watch stated,

Colombian government investigators gathered compelling evidence that army officers set up a “paramilitary” group using active duty, retired, and reserve duty military officers along with hired paramilitaries who effectively operated alongside Army soldiers and in collaboration with them.¹⁵

The Washington based Center for International Policy further stated in their February 2000 report that although official government policy calls for the army to combat the paramilitaries, collaboration is common at the brigade and battalion levels.

¹² “FARC – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia,” *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/specials/0008/organization.profiles/farc.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

¹³ Scott Wilson, “Wider War in Colombia,” *Washington Post*, 6 September 2001, p. A1.

¹⁴ “The AUC – Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia,” *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/specials/0008/organization.profiles/auc.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

¹⁵ Ibid.

This cooperation rarely involves soldiers and “paras” openly working side-by-side on maneuvers against civilian populations. Instead, the security forces share intelligence with paramilitary counterparts, quietly provide transportation, vacate zones where abuses are to take place, and look the other way while they occur. This arrangement allows the military’s hands to appear clean amid an exceedingly dirty war.¹⁶

Like the FARC guerrillas, AUC finances their operations with money from cocaine production.

Their leader, Carlos Castano, told the Colombian newsmagazine “Cambio” in a 1999 interview, “I charge them a 60 percent tax on what they earn.”¹⁷

No discussion of the major players in Colombia can ignore the narco-traffickers. Although the influential drug lords of the Medellin and Cali cartels are no longer in power, they were quickly replaced by smaller, more numerous groups under the protection of both the leftist guerrillas and the right-winged paramilitaries.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

United States support of Plan Colombia has two major strengths. First, it hits at the source of supply for 90 percent of the cocaine and most of the heroin bound for the United States. Second, it continues the crop eradication programs, which were so successful in Peru and Bolivia, destroying nearly 100,000 hectares of coca since 1995.¹⁸

Support of Plan Colombia also has many weaknesses. In seeking to address one national interest, the United States has chosen a strategy that runs counter to another. The examples of human rights violations are numerous. Despite credible evidence that they are routinely working in conjunction with paramilitary forces of the AUC, the United States continues to provide military equipment and training to the Colombian Army. On 16 August, President Pastrana

¹⁶“The Colombian Army,” *CNN.com*.

¹⁷ “The AUC - Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia,” *CNN.com*.

¹⁸ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, “Why Americans Should Care About Plan Colombia.”

yielded to pressure from his senior military commanders, by signing legislation, which gives the military broader powers to wage war without government scrutiny. “Human rights groups condemned Pastrana for signing a law they say will lead to fresh abuses by the Colombian military, which is already criticized at home and abroad for having the hemisphere’s worst human rights record.”¹⁹

Nor has Plan Colombia received the international support, which Presidents Pastrana and Clinton envisioned.

Our regional allies are unanimous in their opposition to Washington’s current military strategy, fearing the war’s escalation. Our European allies, who Pastrana had hoped would provide several billion dollars in aid, regard the military thrust of Plan Colombia as so misguided and self-defeating that they refuse to fund even its social and economic components.²⁰

The United States is not alone in providing military aid to the conflict. The rebels are being supported in their fight against the government by other countries. FARC has received training from members of the Irish Republican Army in managing explosives, and from the Cuban and Venezuelan militaries on handling large caliber weapons and shooting down helicopters and small planes.²¹

Supply reduction through eradication is failing. Despite impressive looking numbers from efforts in Bolivia and Peru, they are measures of effort, not measures of effectiveness.

Colombian cocaine and heroin production are growing rapidly. Drug Enforcement Agency and State Department reports state that crop reduction programs in Bolivia and Peru have shifted

¹⁹ Scott Wilson, “Colombia Increases Military’s Power,” *Washington Post*, 17 August 2001, p. A18.

²⁰ William M. LeoGrande and Kenneth Sharpe, “A Plan, But No Clear Objective,” *Washington Post*, 1 April 2001, p. B2

²¹ Scott Wilson, “Colombia’s Peace Bid at Risk,” *Washington Post*, 25 August 2001, p. A13.

cocoa production to Colombia, and it is steadily increasing.²² Coca production simply moves to a new location. The supply reaching the United States is not being reduced. The street prices of cocaine and heroin are at a 10-year low.²³

Plan Colombia has even been called a political tactic. Former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Myles Frechette told Reuters, “Clinton is coming to Colombia for domestic reasons and that’s to allow [presidential candidate] Al Gore to say that the Clinton administration did not neglect or underfund the drug problem in Colombia.”²⁴

Even President Pastrana sees Plan Colombia as a struggle that has produced few victories. President Pastrana met with foreign journalists as he prepared for an 11-12 September visit by Secretary of State Colin Powell (later postponed due to the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks). He called for a review of the counter-narcotics strategy, calling for a resumption of air interdiction discontinued following the April 2001 shoot down of a missionary plane over the Amazon. Above all he wants more help bringing peace and stability to his country. He asked for renewal and broadening of the U.S. Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA), which expires in December. The ATPA gives duty-free status to the Andean region’s exports, such as flowers, minerals, coffee, and bananas as legal alternatives to drug production in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Colombia wants to add textiles, food oils, and other products. Pastrana

²² “The Drug Lords,” *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/specials/0008/organization.profiles/drug.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

²³ “U.S. Must Cut Drug Use to Help Colombia, Leaders Say,” *CNN.com*, 27 Feb 2001, available from <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/americas/02/27/bush.pastrana.02/index.html>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

²⁴ Carol Clark, “Plan Colombia: Is the U.S. Addicted to Military Fixes?” *CNN.com*.

summed up his feelings by saying, “We’ve said to the Americans: don’t give us dollars. We don’t want money. Give us trade. Give us a chance to compete.”²⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colombia is a country in crisis. The United States needs to help stabilize and bring peace to the country through a long-term commitment to economic engagement through programs such as ATPA, as recently proposed by President Pastrana prior to his scheduled meeting with Secretary Powell.

Colombia’s drug problem starts in the United States. Americans are to blame, not Colombians. We must start by recognizing that it is an American problem. We must reduce the demand for illegal drugs. We must be willing to take the politically painful course of enacting legislation, which also puts the casual white middle/upper class drug users at risk of being punished. We must hold our own people accountable.

We must treat those who are truly addicted. No one ever intentionally set out to become a drug addict. New treatments are available that did not exist ten years ago. New treatments work. Dr. Alan Leshner, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse at the National Institutes of Health said, “Advances in science over the last decade have fundamentally revolutionized everything we think about the nature of drug abuse and addiction.”²⁶

The 1989 National Drug Control Strategy proposed a well-balanced approach. Missing from execution of the strategy has been enactment of the user accountability laws. The strategy recommended that:

²⁵ Associated Press, “Colombia Calls for Drug War Review,” *New York Times*, 6 September 2001.

²⁶ Beth Nissen, “America’s ‘Other’ Drug Strategy,” *CNN.com*, available from <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/colombia.noframes/story/essays/nissen>; Internet; accessed 12 September 2001.

States should enact a range of penalties for persons caught using or possessing even small amounts of drugs, among them: Suspension of drivers' licenses for 1-5 years. Suspension of State benefits (such as student loans, grants, and contracts) for 1-5 years.²⁷

States can also enact legislation which would provide financial incentives which relate directly to the economic cost of drug abuse, such as requiring health, life, and car insurance companies to offer discounted rates for customers who test drug free.

Another alternative is for large cities to offer its students the option of attending "drug-free" schools. Similar to the concept of cities offering special schools for students interested in the performing arts, college prep, or vocational studies; students could choose to enroll in schools with an enforced drug-free environment. The number of drug-free schools in each city would be based upon demand, but students should be guaranteed the opportunity to attend a drug-free school if they so desire, and pass the mandatory drug tests.

Military action is not the answer to America's drug problem. However, the United States military does offer an untapped wealth of experience in countering drug abuse. At the beginning of the 1980's, drug abuse in the military was rampant. By the end of the decade, the military was virtually drug-free. Military successes were not due to vehicle searches at the main gate (interdiction), or intelligence agents infiltrating drug hot spots downtown and passing tips to police (source country efforts), but were due to intensive programs of demand reduction and ever increasing standards of user accountability. In the fight against drugs at the national level, we should use the military's corporate knowledge as the world's most successful case study in eliminating drug abuse. We should not use the military solution of firepower, firepower, and more firepower that failed us 30 years ago in Vietnam.

²⁷ The White House. National Drug Control Strategy: 1989, 126.

Finally, the people of the United States must be made to recognize the mayhem they are causing in other countries. Drug use is not a victimless crime as was once thought. The victims are South American peasants who are dying by the thousands as affluent Americans in safe surroundings abuse cocaine and heroin. We could take a lesson from the highly successful anti-fur activists in the 1980s, as they fought to stop the use of wild animals to make fur clothing. *A television ad showed beautiful models arriving at a big event. The crowd ooh'd and aah'd as they stepped from their limousines wearing beautiful furs. Blood began to appear, slowly at first, then in gushes from beneath their furs. It is the blood of the murdered animals. Everyone began screaming in horror and the crowd panicked.* Imagine a similar add today: *A room of beautiful people are having a party. As a smiling woman snorts a line of cocaine, blood begins to ooze from her nose, signifying the blood spilled by the victims of drug related violence in South America...* Very graphic, but perhaps it is the wake up call America needs. Use cocaine, and you finance the bloodshed and violence in South America. You too have blood on your hands from the slaughter of innocent Colombian peasants.

CONCLUSION

The United States should abandon Plan Colombia as a failed strategy. The United States is breaking its own rules by allying itself with a military known for human rights abuses. It's only a matter of time before the Colombian Army becomes the source of major embarrassment and does irreparable harm to America's reputation. The United States can better help Colombia by engaging them economically, and by fighting against drugs in its own country, thus eliminating the primary source of income for the rebel fighters and the paramilitaries.

The United States needs to look at alternative drug control strategies focused on demand side reduction through user accountability and education. Source country drug eradication

programs sound wonderful on the political campaign trail, but reliance on supply side reductions to solve America's drug problems has never succeeded. There is no shortage of drugs on the streets today and the prices of cocaine and heroin are at a ten-year low.

Support from neighboring countries and Europe never materialized; President Pastrana is calling for a review of the strategy; and the Bush Administration has no ownership in the plan. The time is right to abandon Plan Colombia.

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